

Vanishing Culture: Type Ephemera: Lessons in Endearment

by Eve Scarborough

What is type ephemera and why does it need to be preserved?

Type ephemera, specifically the kind collected by [Letterform Archive](#), refers to paper goods used to advertise or display typefaces for purchase. Often produced by foundries, type ephemera takes many structural forms and examples including—

- [a paper folio](#) containing multiple examples of types in use, such as mock restaurant menus, travel pamphlets, concert programs and business cards.
- [a saddle stitched book](#) with one or more typefaces, referred to as a type specimen, including examples of the upper and lowercase alphabet or shown alongside sample sentences.
- [a small booklet](#) printed in black, red and green ink, illustrating the foundry's seasonal collection of holiday borders and ornaments.

From an archival perspective, type ephemera is important to preserve because it captures a time when past printing technologies and methods of bookbinding were abundant. While there are [multiple organizations](#), museums and libraries dedicated to preserving fine press and book arts, not all are accessible to everyone, and only a handful focus specifically on instruction. Thus, it is urgent for type ephemera to be digitized and remain widely available to the public, especially as interest in learning book arts and letterpress printing continues to grow. Ephemera is unique in that challenges notions of value and permanence, two ideas that dominate special collections and archives. Its temporal nature as both everyday and non-archival objects invites us to consider, and in some cases witness, how pieces of ephemera were repurposed and transformed by their makers and guardians.

It is difficult to find and name the workers who cast, set, printed, and bound the specimens that eventually made their way to the archive. At the time I was cataloging this collection, the metadata fields we used included columns to note typeface designers, foundry names, and potential partner distributors. There was also a column to include the object worktype; “metal type” appears frequently throughout the spreadsheet. As I worked, I noticed that many of the specimens were produced with acidic paper¹, intended for immediate distribution to print shops

¹ Acidic paper refers to paper manufactured with acids, a method that became popular in the mid-nineteenth century. The long cellulose chains in paper degrade slowly over time due to prolonged exposure to air, but the presence of acids catalyzes the process significantly. The presence of acid impacts the paper's longevity, making it brittle and more susceptible to tearing.

and customers. Sometimes I would come across a pamphlet or binding that expanded unexpectedly, or made use of additional space. I began making note of the type of structure or binding for each specimen in the object description field:

“Booklet, 12 pages. Saddle stitched binding. Light blue cover. Single color printing. Black ink on white paper.”

Including the names of these structures allowed me to begin filling the gaps in knowledge. By including them, I hoped that their presence would spark curiosity among viewers and provide insight to those researching book structures. Through writing and editing metadata, I could contribute to the dialogue between the object and its makers, and lend what I knew as a book artist and archival worker to future researchers and visitors.

Many of the objects I have cataloged during my time with this collection bear signs of use: paragraphs of type circled in ballpoint pen or cut out entirely, lead-smudged fingerprints likely left by typesetters, signatures coming undone from their text blocks. These details are the most precious to me. They are instances in which an object left an impression on its reader, and in turn, its readers left a tangible impression on the object. By making note of these imperfections in the metadata, I hope to preserve the labor and relational histories of the objects, and in a way, center the people who made them. 92 years ago, typography scholar Beatrice Warde argued that good printing should aim to be almost invisible, likening the rare success to [a crystal goblet](#) filled with wine (Warde 11, 13). Imperfect, dog-eared, oxidizing type specimens upend this notion, instead placing emphasis on construction and transformation rather than content. The text included in type ephemera is not meant to convey a message or narrative; rather, it is present to center and sell the type. As letterpresses are no longer the primary means of print production, new styles of letterpress printing have become popular—one example being the “bite” or heavy impression of type into paper—revealing first and foremost, the hand of the printer.

As an archivist, ephemera is endearing to me because it is a form of printed matter that is not meant to endure. Cataloging ephemera transformed the way I thought about time, decay, and value. Before entering the Archive, I favored examples of pristine letterpress printing and craft. Presently, I have grown fond of and admire the work that reminds us of our own temporality. Ephemera still holds a place in our lives, though its proliferation is diminishing as we move toward a more environmentally conscious world. Digital spaces have overwhelmingly become our personal platforms for documentation, record-keeping and more. Perhaps we live in a city that still issues paper bus tickets, or write our grocery lists on square sticky notes, or cram the free paper maps into our backpacks at the visitor center before a hike. Perhaps not. Think of the lifetimes that these objects live, crumpled into our pockets, or refused at cash registers and kiosks, waiting for their turn to be useful. How might we make meaning of, archive, or begin to transform the ephemera in our lives? What can we learn from historic type ephemera, not just as records of printmaking techniques or bound structures, but as anachronisms of the present?

Works Cited:

Warde, Beatrice. "The Crystal Goblet, Or Why Printing Should Be Invisible." *The Sylvan Press*, 1955. Web accessed 15 September 2024.

About the author

Eve Scarborough is a Vietnamese-American writer and book artist. Her work explores the tension between structure and content, memory and language loss, and information decay as it relates to archives. Her current practice is grounded in critical theory and craft techniques including bookmaking, letterpress printing, and hand papermaking. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in English from Mills College with a minor in Book Art. Presently, she digitizes ephemera, posters, process work, and more at Letterform Archive in San Francisco.

This essay is part of the Internet Archive's [Vanishing Culture](#) series, highlighting the power and importance of preservation in our digital age.